

## **EMMANUEL LEADERSHIP RESPONSE TO LATEST EVENTS.**

(Extended Version)

As a church leadership we are acutely aware of the seriousness of the days we are living in, and we wanted to prayerfully respond to help shepherd and guide you with what we hope is a biblically faithful response.

Let me start by saying we have sensed the Lord stir us deeply over the past couple of years to contend for another awakening of His Spirit in our land. We have sensed the words of the Apostle Peter extremely pertinent.

Everything in the world is about to be wrapped up, so take nothing for granted. Stay wide-awake in prayer. Most of all, love each other as if your life depended on it. Love makes up for practically anything. 1 Peter 4:7-8 MSG

Of course, we are not predicting these are the days Jesus will definitely come back, but then neither was the Apostle Peter when he wrote these inspired words. What he was sure of however was the urgency of the day he lived in, the holiness of the hour he was positioned for, and the need for a kind of 'fear and trembling' in the church he led. We as a leadership sense this same holy urgency in our hearts, a 'watching and waiting', as we witness creation groaning, arguably louder than ever in most of our lifetimes. We are being called to an extraordinary level of focus and intent to seek the Lord in these days, a fresh militancy in intercession, an undivided heart of devotion and surrender to the Lordship of Jesus, and an incarnated life of radical grace and compassion.

We are deeply saddened and grieved by the events going on in our world in these days: the threat to the life of the unborn in our own country, the systemic racial injustice, which has existed for hundreds of years, the persecution of Christians around the world to which governments are often turning a blind eye, the systemic oppression of woman and children in many parts of the world, the ongoing evil of human trafficking... the list goes on and on. It is more obvious than ever that more serious viruses than COVID19 have existed for too long in the our 21st century civilisation.

As a leadership, we stand against the tide of evil we are witnessing in these days, and in particular, in light of the murder of George Floyd, we stand against all forms of racism and injustice. We believe that all men are made equal in the sight of God, image-bearers of our Father, as Eugene Peterson says, all 'splendid, never-to-be-repeated stories of grace.'

We also believe our faith gives us a mandate to speak up for the most vulnerable in our society. In fact, Jesus said, 'Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me'. Throughout the Bible, God spoke about the need to care for the stranger, the widow and orphan, those oppressed and marginalised by systems built on privilege and power.

We also want to acknowledge where we as the church (generally speaking) could do more: when we have tolerated injustice, compromised the word of God, sung worship songs without seeking justice, and refused to speak out in Jesus-like ways against structures of inequality, sectarianism and oppression (read Amos 5 for further emphasis).

Just as we are all affected personally by the good things of the society in which we dwell (its laws, a healthy economy, its music and food etc) so we are also affected personally by - and to some extent complicit in - its sins. We are all infected and affected by proximity to others, as Covid-19 reminds us. None of us can claim to be without sin (Romans 3:23). We must examine our own hearts before we cast the first stone at anyone (John 8:7).

In this way, while we pray and grieve for brothers and sisters in America, currently facing a tsunami of cultural fractures, we sense there is a pertinent challenge in front of us within our own country. The sectarian spirit is still a deep reality in our land and sadly in many of our hearts. Unfortunately, Northern Ireland has become known (statistically) as one of the most racist places in Europe. People from ethnic backgrounds have not always found it easy to make their new homes amongst us. This is not ok. Of course, we (Emmanuel) have not totally stood idly by. We are privileged to be able to serve our community, through our committed and passionate Compassion work and volunteers, as we practically demonstrate the love of God through meaningful advocacy of people's rights, our clothes bank and food banks, our counselling services, the creating of safe environments of friendship, welcome and compassion, not to mention all the ways many of our church members love, serve and reach out to their neighbours and colleagues.

But we must do more. We can no longer tolerate passive participation. We want to see on earth what will be a reality in Heaven for ever - people from every tribe (ethnicity), tongue and nation declaring Lordship of the Lamb slain for the sins of the world.

We believe across the world today God is dealing with His Church, calling her to truly reflect Him and to awaken His glory on the earth. To do that we need to start with repentance. Judgement mustn't start on places like Facebook, simply spouting opinions or in entering into winning arguments with people in faceless debates. Actually, judging is something Jesus explicitly asks us not to do! (Matthew 7:1)

Rather 'judgement' in the New Testament, we are told, starts at the house of the Lord. It starts with the church not condemning the world but allowing our own lives to be wrecked by the power and love of the Spirit of God. Let us use this moment to examine our hearts, to allow God to search us and know us, to allow the Holy Spirit to rewire our hardened hearts and long-standing mindsets, often subconsciously passed down through the generations. Maybe we are being granted an opportunity in these days to search our own hearts, to listen and learn from those different from ourselves, to pray against injustice and sectarianism, that in turn it might change the trajectory of our own province?

For far too long in our land we have continued to harbour attitudes/prejudices in the deep places of our hearts against the 'other'. This often comes out in even mild forms of 'banter' which only serves to reveal the heart surgery we all still need. Jesus is calling us to let go of these attitudes, to confess our sins to one another and to allow His Lordship to release through us a radical love and grace for the 'other.' We need to run to the cross, fling ourselves on the mercy of God and allow our reconciliation to God, through His extravagant grace, to break down every dividing wall. This is the gospel.

As we hear the Lord speaking to us and His church today, we choose to move forward with hope. God is moving, God is on His

throne, everything else is shaking, the Spirit is doing what Jesus promised He would, 'When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment' (John 16:8). We want to discern His leading carefully, as wise as serpents and gentle as doves - thoughtful, mature, biblically faithful, Christ-like responses to the complexities of our world. We have sensed the Spirit speak to us about many counterfeit spirits at work in these days. We define these as human responses to the issues of our day which have an appearance of 'good' but laden, consciously and subconsciously, with other selfish, man-made agendas. These too will be exposed in the coming days. Often these responses are popularised on the media both from the left and the right politically speaking. We must be careful about everything we hear and read. Yet more often than not these counterfeit spirits come through the lies we have believed about ourselves, the lies laden in our country, about who we are before God and who we are in relation to the 'other'. Again, we say with the Psalmist, 'search me oh God and know me.' And as the church may we receive a fresh mantle to be the 'sons of Isaachar' in these days, those who discern the times we are living through, and strain to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, please remember as a leadership our heart is to serve you, to help guide you, and to lead you. Please feel free to be in contact with us as you seek to understand your place in the world we are currently living in. We don't have all the answers, but we are committed to Jesus, His word, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Together we long to become like Him and lean towards the great future He has for us.

And these three things remain, faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.